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SUBJECT: Peace programs in the Ministry of Education

**¶11. SUMMARY:** On July 29, Poloff met with Anat Zohar, Director of Pedagogic Affairs in the Ministry of Education, to discuss efforts to build a culture of peace in Israeli schools. Zohar described peace education initiatives as ad hoc and inconsistent, driven by principals and NGOs at individual schools. However, a public committee has just formed which aims to review previous efforts and develop an effective, strategic plan for teaching tolerance and peace. The new plan will still take a program-based approach, Zohar explained, because changing the core curriculum-- and the related textbooks-- is time consuming, difficult, and highly politicized. As an example, she cited the controversy over a reference to the Nakba (the Palestinian term, which means "catastrophe," for the 1948 Arab-Israeli War) in Israeli textbooks. End Summary.

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Textbooks Are Not the Proper Tool  
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**¶12.** Zohar explained that fundamental curriculum changes, and the textbooks that are a reflection of this curriculum, are not the best way to help establish a culture of peace. To save money for schools and parents, Israeli law only allows textbooks to be revised every five years, which effectively limits many changes. Furthermore, Zohar said, when a curriculum is open for revision, the demands for additional topics exceed what can be taught in a school year (i.e., the Ministry of the Environment wants to add a unit on water conservation, while the Finance Ministry wants more emphasis on fiscal responsibility, and the Ministry of Justice demands more civic education).

**¶13.** Zohar also pointed out that textbook changes can become politicized. This includes the recent furor over including the Palestinian "Nakba" narrative in some textbooks. Zohar explained that they only added two sentences to second, third, and fourth grade civics textbooks that say the Palestinians consider Israel's independence a catastrophe. The political right seized upon this as a political issue. She noted that the new textbooks were written under the previous, Likud Minister of Education.

**¶14.** According to Zohar, there were also complaints when a new school atlas indicated the "Green Line," which demarcates the territory in the West Bank held by Jordan before 1967. (Note: Some Israeli maps refer to this area as "Judea and Samaria" and do not make reference to the Green Line; others only show the limits of A and B areas under Palestinian administrative control. End Note.) Zohar explained that the Green Line is only included on maps where it is necessary, such as maps that show demographics or administrative boundaries. She added that most textbooks only have satellite maps to avoid borders, which are a final status issue under negotiation.

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Peace Programs Are Easier and More Effective  
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**¶15.** For these reasons, Zohar said that most peace education in schools is done under NGO-led programs that bring Jews and Arab-Israelis together. Recent examples include a course for high school teachers on how to encourage mutual understanding, a program in the North in which mixed groups of Arab and Jewish students make short films that are screened in Haifa, and regular meetings between

various central-Israel principals to discuss peace-building initiatives. This group of principals, formed shortly after the October 2000 riots, develops programs and materials, such as a recent Tu B'Shevat Haggadah that included verses on the environment from both the Torah and the Koran. (NOTE: A Haggadah is a book containing instructions for a ceremonial meal. Tu B'Sheva is the Jewish "New Year for Trees", observed among some secular populations as an environmental commemoration. END NOTE).

¶6. Unfortunately, Zohar said, these programs are ad hoc and inconsistently applied. Usually, a program is proposed to a school by an NGO and then funded by the Ministry based on the school's request. As a result, principals and neighborhoods more receptive to peace get overrun with programs, while other areas have none at all, which Zohar described as focusing on "selling ice to the Eskimos."

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Developing a Comprehensive Approach to Peace Education

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¶7. The Ministry of Education is currently working to develop a more comprehensive and unified approach to peace education. The first phase includes developing a database of all programs currently in place at various schools. The Ministry is also reviewing academic studies on the most effective approaches to teaching peace. Some studies have shown that holding one or two meetings with Jews and Arabs discussing peace has little long-term impact. However, Zohar said, sustained programs geared toward younger children, before attitudes are hardened, or toward emphasizing shared interests, such as sports teams or hobby clubs, are usually more effective.

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¶8. To move forward, the Ministry of Education held a conference of academics, educators and NGOs to help develop a more effective and strategic approach, and to allow for more efficient distribution of resources allotted to peace education. The conference spawned a public committee of experts, which will ultimately make specific policy and program recommendations. Zohar said this committee will begin work in the next few weeks, with results expected in about six months.

¶9. Zohar, a political appointee, expressed concern that these initiatives would be abandoned when Yuli Tamir (Labor) is no longer Minister of Education. She complained that the professional bureaucracy at the Ministry of Education is not empowered enough to ensure continuity, which makes real, systematic planning and review of their curriculum nearly impossible. As a cautionary tale, she described the "Israel 2008" program, which was launched in 2003 as a comprehensive, five-year plan to revamp and modernize Israel's curriculum. In 2007, just as the plan was beginning to take hold and show results, Zohar lamented that the entire program was cut for budgetary reasons, wasting all the time and money that had already been invested. Zohar felt it was likely that the work of the peace education committee would share the same fate in a new government.

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